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ABSTRACT

The Commission of Foster Child Welfare, appointed by the Swedish government, was assigned the task of studying all matters related to care of children in private foster homes and child-care institutions, as well as compiling data on the numbers and types of foster homes. The commission was also instructed to study the informational activities related to foster child care programs and to assess various kinds of aid to foster parents. This summary of the commission's final report deals with the aforementioned topics as well as with public child welfare programs of a preventative nature and some of the problems that arise when public authorities intervene to assume custody of minor children. At the time of the survey nearly 25,000 minors were receiving care outside their parents' homes; of that number 85 percent were in foster homes and the remainder were in various types of institutions. The commission strongly proposes expansion of preventative child welfare programs and the creation of new types of family care as a means of reducing the future need for traditional child welfare institutions. (Author/PC)

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FOSTER CHILD CARE IN SWEDEN

Summary of the report presented by the government Commission on Foster Child Welfare

The Commission on Foster Child Welfare, appointed by the Swedish government a few years ago, was assigned the task of studying all matters related to care of children in private foster homes and child-care institutions, as well as compiling data on the numbers and types of foster homes. The commission was also instructed to study the informational activities related to foster child care programs and to assess various kinds of aid to foster parents.

In examining the role of child care institutions, the commission was asked to devote particular attention to the significance of educational and other activities aimed at furthering child development.

In its final report "Child and Adolescent Welfare in Sweden" (SOU 1974:7) the commission begins by summarizing current child welfare legislation. There is a brief historical survey of child welfare in Sweden and a short presentation of available statistics in this field. There is a description of the work done by Allmänna barnhuset and of recent experimental child welfare programs. The report lists the social and economic benefits available to foster

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parents and discusses the issue of taxation of these benefits.

The discussion and proposals in the report deal with public child welfare programs of a preventive nature as well as some of the problems that arise when public authorities intervene to assume custody of minor children.

Research carried out by the commission

During 1970 and 1971, the commission sponsored three different research projects. One of these was a study entitled "The Extent of Foster Child Care in Swedish Municipal Authorities". Conducted in the autumn of 1970, it was aimed at providing a picture of the extent and types of foster care programs. The study took the form of a questionnaire mailed to all 824 municipal authorities then existing in Sweden. All but four of these municipal authorities completed and returned the questionnaires.

A second research project, called "The Foster Child Study", was also conducted during the autumn of 1970. It was based on a representative section of foster children, totalling 600 in the final stages of the investigation. The study was conducted in two main phases: a questionnaire mailed to the Child Welfare Committee of the municipal authority that had placed each child in its care (except foster home, followed by a home visit and interview with the foster parents.

A third research project, entitled "The Children's Home Study", took the form of a questionnaire mailed during the spring of 1971 to the County Councils and to the three municipal authorities then not under jurisdiction of any County Council. The primary aims were to obtain a picture of what opinions the County Councils (and the three municipal authorities) had about the care provided by children's homes, and to gather current information on the resources and structure of these institutions.

Some of the more important findings

According to the study on "The Extent of Foster Child Care in Swedish Municipal Authorities", nearly 25,000 minors were receiving care outside their parents' homes at the time of the survey (September 1970). About 85 % of these (approx. 21,000) were receiving non-institutional care in foster homes, other private homes or the like, while the remainder (almost 4,000) were living in various types of institutions.

- 17,000 children -- nearly 70 % of the total -- were living in foster homes. (According to official statistics, as of 31 December 1971 there were slightly over 16,300 foster children.)

- 3,000 adolescents aged 16 years or older were living in private homes arranged for them by local Child Welfare Committees.

+ 500 were living in private homes arranged for them by approved schools (juvenile correction centers).

+ 400 had been placed by approved schools in apartments, halfway houses and the like.

+ 700 were being cared for at approved schools.

+ 1,700 minors were living in children's homes.

+ 600 older teenagers were living in boarding homes and about 800 in other adolescent-care or educational institutions.

+ Of all the foster children, three-quarters (about 12,000) had been placed by municipal authorities, and 1/4 had been privately placed.

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The number of children that public authorities had removed from parental custody was considerably higher in the twelve largest Swedish municipal areas than their population would otherwise warrant, whereas the opposite was true of the smallest municipal areas. The medium-sized municipal areas assumed an intermediate position in this respect. Many of the children under public custody had originally come from the larger cities and had been placed in foster homes in smaller communities. A full 64 % of all children placed by the authorities resided in foster homes located in Sweden's least populous municipal areas. The studies also indicate that about 2/3 of the children under public care had been placed in foster homes outside their original municipal boundaries. Placement in a foster home therefore frequently involves a considerable change of milieu.

"The Foster Child Study" also indicated that many of these children had been placed at long geographical distances from their original home environments. Of those under public care, nearly 30 % lived in foster homes located 300 kilometers (183 miles) or more away from their parents. Half of those under public care lived 100 km (61mi.) or more from their parents.

Although placements at long distances from home can sometimes be justified, for instance in order to break an existing pattern of drug abuse, or can sometimes be explained for other reasons such as moving in with relatives, many long-distance placements do not appear to be justified from the standpoint of the child's personal welfare.

According to "The Foster Child Study", abuse of drugs, alcohol or the like by the foster child was rarely among the motives for removing him from his parents' home. This is related to the fact that most of the children in public custody were placed in foster homes as very young children. As the diagram below indicates, nearly half of them were less than 4 years old at the time of placement and about 60 % were under 7 years.

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At the time of the study, their age distribution was completely different: about 50 % of the publicly-placed foster children were under 7 years old, about 20 % were 7-12, and about 30 % were 13-15.

If we compare these two sets of age distributions, it becomes clear that many of the children had lived in foster homes over a long period. Many had lived in the same foster home during the entire period away from their parents. Just over 40 % had lived in their present foster home for more than 5 years.

But 25 % of those placed by child welfare authorities had previously lived in a different foster home. Half had spent some time in children's homes. In other words, many had changed residence one or more times after leaving their parents' homes.

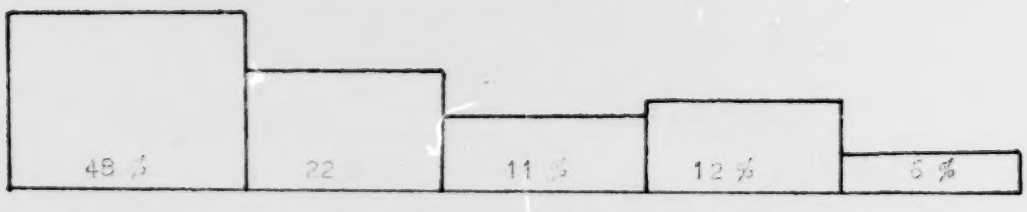
About 30 % of those placed by child welfare authorities were related to their foster parents. In just over half these cases the foster parents were the child's own maternal grandparents. In addition, there were many foster parents who had known the child before the matter of foster home placement had arisen.

People apparently become foster parents largely through the existence of some sort of foster home tradition in their family. About 30 % of the children lived in foster homes where at least one of the parents had come into contact with the foster home system as a child. Over 1/3 of the children placed by public authorities lived in foster homes which had previously housed another foster child.

Municipal allowances were being paid to the foster parents of nearly all the children placed by child welfare authorities. At the time of the confirmation study, the allowance being paid for nearly 40 % of them amounted to SKr 370* per month. This was the figure recommended by the Association of Swedish Municipal Authorities as the minimum compensation for maintenance of a foster child in a private home.

(Diagram)

Ages of foster children at the time when currently (1970) valid decision to remove them from parents' home was taken.



* 1 SKr (Swedish Krona) = US$0.23 or £0.09 (approx.)

Slightly more than 10 % of the foster families received a per-child allowance lower than Skr 375 per month and the remaining 50 % received an allowance of more than Skr 375. (In 1974 the minimum recommended allowance is Skr 610 per month.)

"The Children's Home Study" indicated among other things that in the spring of 1971 there were 187 children's homes in Sweden, of which 114 were reception homes (juvenile halls), 31 infant homes, 11 homes for mothers and 31 special homes. Seventy-one per cent of all the children's homes were owned by County Councils, 17 % by municipal authorities outside the jurisdiction of County Councils, and 12 % by other organizations.

There were about 2,800 places in children's homes, of which about 2/3 were occupied at the time of the study. (On 31 December 1972, according to official statistics, there were 170 children's homes with 2,500 places.) The total number of employees at children's homes was slightly over 2,000, of which 75 % were employed full-time. The average number of full-time employees per available place was 0.6 and per child actually under care 0.9.

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The commission's analysis of current problems and proposed reforms

In the part of its report that includes its own proposals, the Foster Child Welfare Commission examines the importance of publicly sponsored preventive child welfare programs. The commission is of the opinion that such programs should receive increased support. Preventive child welfare measures should include financial subsidies to parents and their children as well as other public arrangements to provide them with necessary help and services. In addition, municipal authorities should devote greater efforts than in the past towards guaranteeing that the living environment in their communities fulfills elementary social needs. The environment must be made as stimulating as possible for young people to grow up in.

Secondly, public authorities should channel greater resources into preventive welfare programs designed for those youngsters who are clearly subject to various social risks. Wherever possible, these programs should be incorporated into the normal municipal social welfare services. The programs discussed include the following:

The commission proposes that the primary and secondary schools provide parenthood education to prepare students for their future responsibilities as adults. Existing course offerings for expectant parents and young parents should be expanded. The commission also advocates appropriation of Skr 2,000,000 for parenthood education via radio and television.

The commission believes that the existing local child health centers are in a unique position to establish contact at an early stage with all families that have children. These centers should therefore be utilized more effectively for preventive child welfare purposes.

The commission also points to the importance of nursery schools (pre-schools) and the regular school system in the upbringing of children and teenagers. The commission is convinced that the nursery schools do much to prevent social maladjustments, particularly among children with special needs. This is a strong argument for increasing public support in this field.

The commission also emphasizes that various types of children's recreation programs can be extremely effective in preventing subsequent social problems. The commission therefore proposes that money from the State Inheritance Fund be appropriated for experimental recreation programs for children under age 7, on the same basis as existing appropriations for children aged 7-12.

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Some basic principles behind child welfare programs

The commission describes some of the general principles of child and adolescent welfare which underlie its proposals.

The first is the principle of normalization. This means that public programs for aid to families with special needs should be designed in a way that people do not feel they are receiving exceptional treatment.

The commission also believes in the principle of geographical proximity, i.e. that care and treatment provided by public authorities should be available on a local basis. Sending children and teenagers to homes far away from their parents should be avoided.

Thirdly, no matter what form of public care is chosen, it should be accepted wherever possible on a voluntary basis by those involved.

Finally, those directly affected by child welfare programs should have considerable influence over both the form and contents of the care being provided. Even in cases where a minor must be removed from his family because of acute social problems, it is important for both the child and his parents to have a say in choosing a suitable form of care.

Municipal child welfare services: The therapeutic team approach

The commission proposes that the municipal authorities should, in principle, assume responsibility for all child welfare programs

in Sweden. Each municipal authority should ensure that the necessary child welfare facilities are available. If necessary, municipal authorities can collaborate in maintaining more specialized facilities. New legislation should also make each municipal authority legally responsible for all the child welfare services it has arranged, even in cases where these are provided outside its own boundaries.

The commission sketches a model for municipal child and adolescent welfare services (see sketch). The purpose is to make more efficient use of already available resources. The model includes a so-called therapeutic team. This unit should be made flexible in terms of staffing, case load capacity and available treatment facilities. The team can employ the services of social workers, physicians, child psychologists, other child care staff, recreation leaders, etc. Parents should also be able to participate in its work.

Sketch of model for municipal child and adolescent welfare services

(see page 8.)

Care in the parents' home

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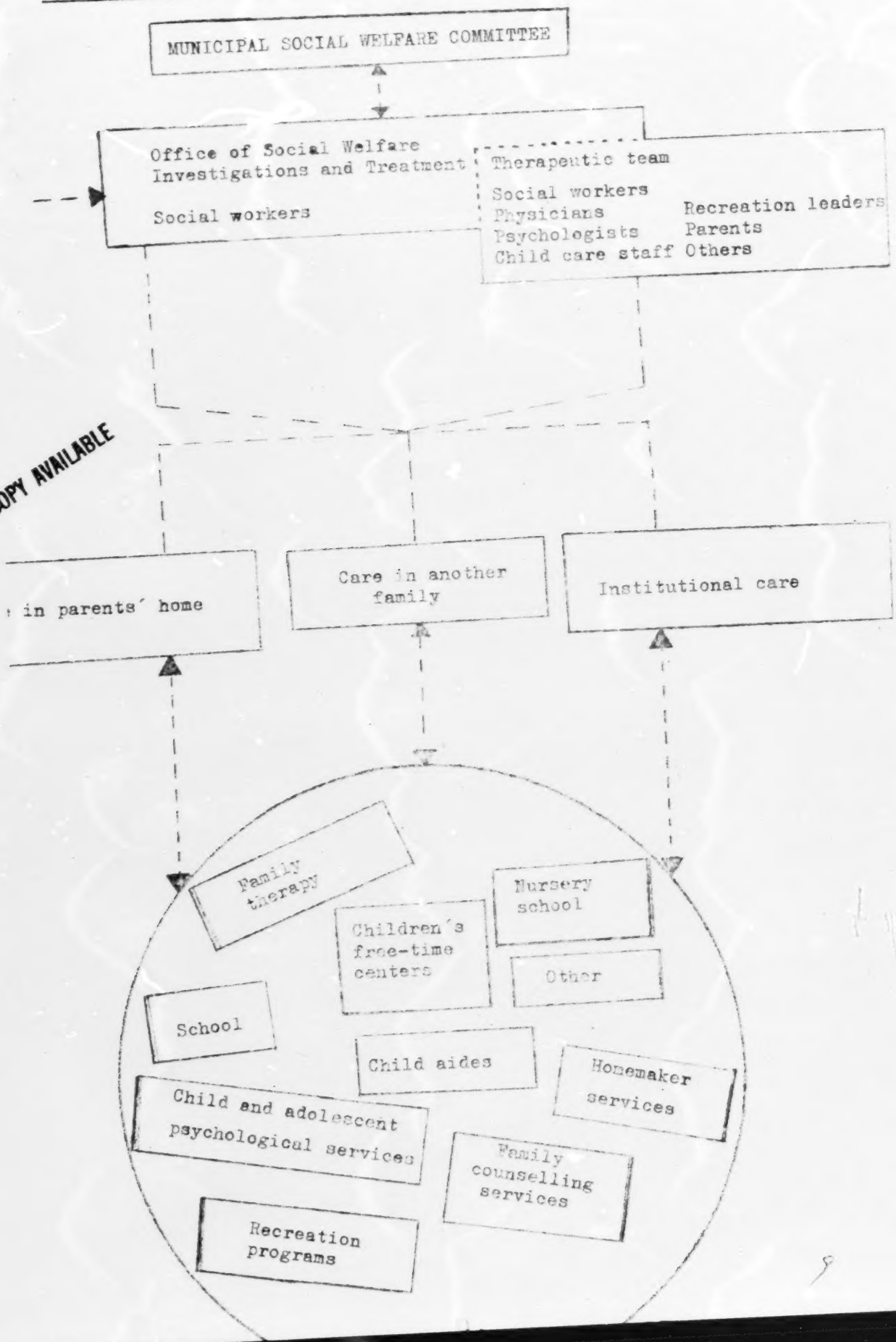
According to the principle of normalization, the welfare services provided to minors under public care should be designed in such a way that the youngsters do not feel singled out for exceptional treatment. While working with a youngster while he is living mainly in his parents' home, it is usually possible to avoid letting intervention by public authorities in itself create an abnormal situation. He and his parents are also in a better position to help influence the type of care provided.

If public child welfare programs for youngsters living with their parents are to become a viable alternative to foster homes or institutional care, current economic resources must be re-distributed. Residence in the parents' home should thus be combined with various child welfare measures in a way that provides effective guidance.

To make this more feasible, there must be greater collaboration between various social welfare agencies. The model of municipal child and adolescent welfare services utilizing a therapeutic team approach (see sketch below) can supply the basic prerequisites. The proper combination of welfare services required in each particular case can be planned by the therapeutic team before being delegated to other municipal agencies. The team can thus become the central agency for deciding the types of aid and counseling to be provided.

The kinds of aid available to minors living in their parents' homes include financial support to the family in the form of social assistance, rent subsidies and the like, as well as other material help such as better housing, employment or education. It is obviously unacceptable that a child should have to move into another family or an institution merely because his parents lack

Sketch of model for municipal child and adolescent welfare services



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proper housing, child-minding facilities or employment.

As for more service-oriented measures, the homemaker system could certainly prove important. The commission believes that the homemakers and child aides currently employed by municipal authorities to help other categories of people should be made more readily available for use by municipal child welfare agencies. The commission proposes creation of a pilot program for supplementary training of municipal homemakers and child aides, to be administered under the auspices of the National Labor Market Board.

If the youngster remains in his parents' home, various types of family therapy may be of considerable use in helping to work out his problems. Family therapy inside or outside the home is designed to help improve the relationships between members of the same family. The commission advocates the creation of experimental family therapy programs in a number of Swedish municipal areas. It proposes the appropriation of Skr 6,000,000 over a three-year period to stimulate experiments in the use of this type of therapy.

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Care in Another Family

The commission believes that a greater public commitment to preventive welfare measures for children and adolescents, along with expansion of public aid and services to families with children, will reduce the need for placement outside the parents' home. Youngsters who cannot receive the care they need in their parents' home should be placed in a foster home rather than an institution wherever possible. This is because a foster home is better equipped to fulfill the principles of normalization, geographical proximity, voluntary acceptance of public care and co-participation in decision making, all of which the commission regards as desirable in the field of child and adolescent welfare.

The commission emphasizes the importance of following the principles of normalization and geographical proximity in cases where care is provided outside the parents' home. Moving into a foster home should involve as few changes of milieu as possible. Contacts with the child's previous environment should be maintained if practicable. Placement in the new family should be undertaken in consultation with the child and his parents. Public services available to the "new" family should be increased and the supervision provided by the local Child Welfare Committee should be improved. With these guidelines for future foster home care, it should be possible to reduce what the commission regards as an excessive number of transfers from one foster family to another. The real purpose of child welfare services - to allow the child to remain with his own parents, or failing that, to create a normal and stable environment in another family - can thus be better served.

The commission proposes that the current system of foster child care be replaced by a system of what it calls private and municipal family homes. The private family homes are synonymous with the foster homes that the municipal authorities rely on today. The municipal family homes, on the other hand, are a new concept: a modified and slightly enlarged version of the foster home with a closer tie-in to other municipal family services.

Private family homes should be available both for long-term and short-term placements. The number of youngsters living in such a home at any given time should not exceed two. Private family homes should receive larger resources and more public services than many foster homes are receiving at present. The local Child Welfare Committee should be responsible for maintaining continuous contact with these homes. Those who take care of the children should be able to obtain information and help when needed. The municipal therapeutic team described earlier may be suitable agency to administer these services. The municipal authority should pay a fee to the person providing child care in the private family home, in accordance with an agreement between them. The commission would like this compensation to take the form of a fixed sum per child per month. In addition to this fee, the municipal authority should re-imburse the costs of food, clothing, transportation, educational materials, etc. The commission suggests that only the fee be considered taxable income.

Municipal family homes should be established and operated by the local Child Welfare Committee. At least one member of the staff should be a full-time employee of the municipal authority. Generally speaking it would be desirable if the municipal authority provided the building as well as certain furnishings and educational materials needed by the children. At least one of the staff at each municipal family home should have social-work or teacher training or special experience with public programs in the field of child and adolescent welfare.

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The municipal family homes are intended mainly for older children and for teenagers, but this does not exclude them from being used to take care of younger children. The homes should be equipped to provide extensive welfare services, including handling crisis situations. They should therefore always be well-prepared for such emergencies. The municipal family homes should provide a direct alternative to placement in traditional child-care institutions. They should operate as much as possible like an ordinary family. To prevent such a home from assuming an institutional character, the number of youngsters living there at any given time should not exceed four. In addition, the homes should be used both for placing youngsters who have come under public care and for providing residences for other young people needing special assistance.

Central government funds should be made available to cover the salaries and fringe benefits of the staff employed in the municipal family homes. The commission estimates that government outlays for this purpose would total Skr 8 - 10 000 000 per fiscal year. The commission moreover proposes that the State Inheritance Fund re-imburse the municipal authorities for their expenses in acquiring and furnishing the municipal family homes. It estimates the amount required for this purpose at Skr 2 - 3 000 000 per fiscal year.

Training courses for foster parents are currently available in some municipal areas. The commission asks that these courses be made permanent and that the revised curriculum include training in child and adolescent care tailored to the requirements of the new types of family homes. Municipal authorities wishing to sponsor such courses should be allowed to do so. The courses should take the form of labor market training, as they have done in the past.

Institutional Care

The commission believes that the proposed expansion of preventive services and the creation of new types of family care will make it possible to reduce the future need for traditional child-welfare institutions. The latter should be chosen as the proper alternative only in cases where more open types of care cannot provide the special therapeutic resources that are necessary.

The commission suggests that these institutions be referred to as "children's homes" and "youth homes". The older generic term "child welfare institutions" has an authoritarian ring to it, at least in Swedish. Children's homes with poor locations, i.e. where there is little or no opportunity to combine institutional care with other types of social welfare services, should be closed down. The commission feels that certain children's homes with good locations should be changed so that they come as close as possible to fulfilling the child welfare principles discussed earlier. Children living in these homes should not be sorted into different categori if this practice can be avoided. The number of places in a childre home or in each independent unit thereof should not exceed eight.

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Children's homes should have sufficient resources to enable them to offer intensive and well-rounded services. In the opinion of the commission, these homes ought to be just as well-equipped with educational aids as nursery schools and children's free-time centers. The staff should have training that makes it possible for them to fulfill the children's educational and rehabilitative need The youngsters in these homes should, wherever possible, be able t take part in activities outside the home. At the same time, youngsters living in the vicinity should be given opportunities to participate in activities within the home.

Each municipal authority should independently, or in collaboration with other local authorities, be responsible for supplying the necessary number of places in children's homes and youth homes. The commission proposes that the County Councils and private organizations no longer be responsible for these institutions.

Costs, Central Government Grants, Etc

If implemented, the commission's proposals would entail increased municipal expenditures as a result of expanded social welfare services, more adequate aid to private family homes, establishment of municipal family homes, and the transfer of responsibility for children's homes and youth homes to municipal authorities. To encourage the expansion of existing social welfare programs, the central government has already made grants available to cover the costs of additional municipal homemakers, more nursery schools and so forth. The commission proposes that the State Inheritance Fund also finance pilot programs in family therapy and recreational activities for children under age 7. The government itself should assume the cost of parenthood education, trial programs in supplementary training of homemakers and child aides, and training of staff to work in the new municipal family homes. The commission proposes central government grants to cover the operating

expenses of the municipal family homes, along the same lines as the existing grants to municipal day care centers. Finally, the State Inheritance Fund should finance the acquisition and furnishing of municipal family homes.

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The author is solely responsible for the opinions expressed in this article.

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